

SHEEP'S CLOTHING

Drawing by James Montgomery Flagg

CHAPTER X Continued

WELL," Craven demanded with pardonable impatience. Peter started and batted his eyes. "Eh?" he murmured stupidly. "What do you think?" "Ah—about what?" "Good Lord!" Craven exploded a full deep note of exasperation. "Here I sit yammering at you."

"Sorry," said Peter. "Fact is, I know Mrs. Merrilees won't mind being let into my confidence on the ground floor—fact is, I'm in love with your daughter, Tad. And Queen's talking to her. So, naturally, I'm tick with jealousy."

"It's like your cheek," also roared Craven. "Have you mentioned the matter to Lydia?"

"Certainly not! She's having too good a time. Women won't listen to a gratuitous lover unless bored or actively unhappy."

"Then why bother me with your lovesick vapors?"

"Well, I wanted to see how rusty you'd cut up. Besides, Mrs. Beggarstaff has discovered my hideous secret, and is now busy—or about to be—distributing handbills."

"Can't you shut her up?"

"The law forbids cruel and inhuman punishments. Besides, I'm not sure I want her hushed. I'm not ashamed of the fact, and if I let the Beggarstaff alone, sooner or later she or someone will mention the matter to Lydia, and then—well, rouse a woman's curiosity, and half your battle's won."

Craven turned to inspect the pair at the rail. "She might do worse," he observed.

"Thanks."

"Than Queen, I mean."

"Curse it!" said Peter, flushing. "I'm in earnest, Tad."

"I believe you are," Mrs. Merrilees interposed with dispassionate—human interest. "I really believe you are, Peter. Certainly you were never so intemperately stupid when in love with me."

Peter, by this time, roared so, fixed her with a no-proving glance. "Offered in the presence of a third party," he said severely, "shades is admissible. Merely because I didn't like to show my detestation for your infatuated adoration, you take up with an incorrigible rascal like Tad here, and then get sore because I don't forbid the famous 'rescue' child?"

"Just for that," said the woman, "just for that, Peter, I'm going to keep you out of my house until you're fit to be a husband—and I know I hope they'll scold and bluster."

"Maddest!" Craven suggested with open indignity. "Be quiet, Tad, and run an errand for me, like a respectable child." Mrs. Merrilees tossed the drawing of a facework with a look that was a tiny pocketbook, and then she had extracted a sheet of paper. "Take that to the parlor and bring me what it calls for."

"What is it?"

"You'll see when I show you."

WITH a most reluctant Craven heaved up from his place and rolled forward, while his fiancée cradled her hands and regarded him with a whimsical smile.

"Quit it!" he said, angrily. "You haven't got anything on me, you know."

"How about the other?"

"Others? I never looked any way but a god-fearing this."

"Peter?"

"Well, hardly ever. And, anyway, from now on I'm going to wear a signboard here." He stuck his finger upon his waistcoat.

Private. No-Thoughtful. This signboard.

"It seems so funny now," laughing quietly, the woman looked up to review Lydia with a long glance. "She's a dear girl," she observed.

"She's the only one being!"

"Really, Peter?"

"Here to die?"

"You'll make a funny wagon law."

"I'd give a good deal to be sure of that."

"Promise never to call me 'Mamma' and I'll do my best for you."

"It's a promise. But what can you do?"

"Leave that to me."

"What chance have I got, with Quid making the pass? He's a regular fellow. I'm only a drawing room entertainer."

"He's a strange man," Mrs. Merrilees murmured. "If

he hadn't taken up such an impossible profession—"

"You'd have played for him yourself?"

"Perhaps," said the woman, peacefully.

"Do you suppose he has a secret hand now, about this case, I mean?"

"Call him, and I'll ask."

Peter complied with the best grace imaginable. "Quon! I say, Abbotson, come over here a minute. A beautiful lady wants to ask you something." In a lower tone he added, "You're the best little diplomat ever. I'll be grateful as long as I live." And rising with the sum of smiles, he drew up chairs for Lydia and Queen.

YES, Mrs. Merrilees, the detective inquired, falling the place at her side.

"Peter and I have been bickering about you," the lady blushed bravely. "Are you, or are you not, wasting your brilliant talents on my devoted track?"

Queen looked puzzled. "Something on your conscience?" he advanced tentatively. "You don't mean to try any smuggling this trip, I hope?"

"I can't make up my mind. I'd have to. Are you interested?"

"Only in your interests. Be advised, don't."

"Why?" Mrs. Merrilees pointed. "Why not, if, as Peter would say, I can get away with it?"

"If for no more moral reason," said the detective seriously, "because it can't be done. The customs people are laying for you."

"They'll be disappointed."

"Don't deceive yourself. Every man on the force knows it was your agent who secretly purchased that three-hundred-thousand-franc pearl-and-diamond collar at Cotter's in Paris."

"But I've quite made up my mind never again to stoop to anything so truly low as smuggling."

Over this virtuous protestation Mrs. Merrilees pursed purs lips behind her dancing eyes; then Lydia down and turned in a general laugh as Craven reappeared with a small black box of black metal.

"Mayn't I goggle too?" he inquired plaintively, looking from face to face as he delivered the box to its owner.

"Not worth repeating," his fiancée reported, fitting a key into the lock. "I was merely swearing I won't be so good—when every blessed drop of blood in me cries out against the sinful—indecent—of paying duty on—this!"

OPENING the dispatch bag, which revealed a handful of some powder of ground monsoon, unlocked this in turn, and disclosed that same necklace which Queen had just named, watching with a smile at gratified vanity the effect on her four friends; an effect the same in no two instances.

Queen eyed the necklace intently, smiling at some secret thought; his quiet, studious, invariable smile.

Peter discovered no excitement whatever; scowled, bored, if anything.

Craven sat back after one brief look, frowning furrow-like but for eyes that shone quick, glowering, distrustful—down, right and left. To his patent refinement of the admiring tables was recurrent.

And Lydia was thinking she had never seen anything

quite so beautiful that wasn't alive. This may have been because pearls had never found place among her father's presents, though she had always desired them with a great longing, to whom jewels had distinct individualities, a meaning and a fascination incomprehensible to the general run of people. It was part of Lydia's inheritance to love and to long to possess all manner of beautiful things.

At length, "Sixty thousand dollars?" Queen inquired listlessly.

"My dear man, I do believe you've seen the lot!"

Smiling, the detective shook his head.

"Worth half as much again," Mrs. Merrilees offered. "Cotter wanted ninety."

"They seem perfectly matched," Queen returned, knitting his brows; "but I'd like to look at them in a stronger light."

"Take them out into the sun, if you like."

Craven sat forward in nervous impatience. "Do be reasonable!" he expostulated. "It's sheer folly to have that thing up here at all, with God knows who spying. And there are some queer fish abroad—oh, Queen?"

"Rather," the detective agreed dryly.

"Please be advised," Craven urged. "Look that thing up again and let me take it back to the parlor."

"Tad, you're tiresome," Mrs. Merrilees began.

But Queen interrupted. "Craven is right."

"Oh, well! If you will spoil everything, take it off the fun out of my surprise."

"Surprise?" Peter echoed.

Mrs. Merrilees nodded emphatically. "Look well at them, my friends, for the minute I get them through the customs, to safe deposit they go and then—well, she paused deliberately, with a challenging smile.

"Why?" Peter demanded blankly. "Don't you ever mean to wear 'em, Betty?"

She shook her head. "They're not for me, Peter. If I dared, I should wear them, just as I am, any about it. But since I don't dare, I mean to keep them for a wedding present to my son-in-law—or I over have one." She closed the case with a snap.

Lydia sat back with a little gasp, her eyes black with confusion. Queen laughed an odd, brief laugh and glanced aside at Craven. This last turned to his betrothed with a startled gesture and lips that quivered. Peter Traut alone betrayed no abnormal emotion. Glimming cheerfully, he watched the two women, absorbed in each other. Lydia finding breath enough for the protest, "But, Mrs. Merrilees, you mustn't!" the other, confirming her intention with an emphatic nod and the statement, "But I've made up my mind. What so you may as well give me my trunk. Besides, you promised always to call me Betty."

Lacking the metal box, she rose. "Come, Tad! I owe my appetite five more laps round the deck before luncheon. Peter, please take this back to the parlor and get his receipt. If you're afraid, Lydia'll go along to protect you."

"What becomes of me?" Queen demanded with mock tenderness.

"You're to walk the other side of me," the lady replied imperiously, "and help me make Tad nervous."

Craven breathed heavily. "Whether I like it or not." With a last reluctant glance at the treasure that he rose and somewhat sulily prepared to close behind.

CHAPTER XI

MRS. BEGGARSTAFF was right, who herself admitted that she was always right; Lydia was a very happy girl. She had, indeed, never been so happy since those memorable days when Craven's fair, open, and always unexpected attentions at Beggarland had invariably signified his assuming office of political indulgence, trifles from which, as from the far side of fairy tales, she emerged in brilliant adolescence to renew a acquaintance with the hand and quiver fans of life as lived in Mrs. Greenleaf Bloomfield's elegant house, with the chilly routine of the Misses Smith's Select Academy for Daughters of Gentleman.

She lived those days in delicious excitement. She would be a strange girl of twenty had her imagination been quickened to the romance inherent in the words, "I am going." To think herself the object of healthy, sane, well-meaning daughter and confidant of a peer nation of domestic diplomacy; to think she must ever keep her courage bright in the shadow of unspoken dangers; to forever lead in the great secret, conquest "small" always wary in the shifting labyrinth of that twilight web which adult intelligences were used to spinning round her and her father;—in those perceptions mingled delight as deep and abiding as that of a girl playing the wiles and at her first but one.

Not infrequently she would catch Craven regarding

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS

LYDIA CRAVEN, a beautiful, attractive, intelligent young girl, is betrothed to a man of high social position, who is a very successful man in the city. She is a very happy girl. She has a very happy father, who is a very successful man in the city. She is a very happy girl. She has a very happy father, who is a very successful man in the city.

Her father, Mr. Craven, is a very successful man in the city. He is a very successful man in the city. He is a very successful man in the city. He is a very successful man in the city. He is a very successful man in the city.

Lydia's father, Mr. Craven, is a very successful man in the city. He is a very successful man in the city. He is a very successful man in the city. He is a very successful man in the city. He is a very successful man in the city.

Peter Traut, a whole-souled young man, becomes enamored of Lydia, an apparently dull Queen, a detective friend of Mrs. Beggarstaff.